

Conflicting Japanese Responses to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Atsushi Yamagata

Abstract

This article explores Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011. In particular, it examines the rationales of the Japanese government and others who expressed opinions on the crisis. Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in March 2011, a large number of civilians have been forced to flee their country of origin. Japan has been reluctant to accept refugees although it has pledged a large amount of financial assistance to international organizations. This article explores the rationales of Japanese responses as expressed in media texts and proceedings of the Diet and its committees, with a particular focus on issues of national identity and state identity.

Keywords: Japan, Japanese refugee policy, the Syrian refugee crisis, identity, state identity, national identity

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in March 2011, a large number of civilians have been exposed to fierce conflict. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, 6.3 million people had been internally displaced by violence, and 5.1 million people had fled the country as of July 2017.¹ Of those who fled the country, most are in neighbouring countries: 3.1 million in Turkey, 1 million in Lebanon, 660,000 in Jordan, 240,000 in Iraq and 120,000 in Egypt,² which has had an enormous impact on public services in those countries.³ The flow of refugees has reached European countries as

well, resulting in about 980,000 asylum applications having been submitted in the area as of June 2017.⁴ In this article, I analyse Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011. I am particularly interested in the rationales expressed by the Japanese government and others who have expressed opinions on the crisis.

To address the Syrian refugee crisis, some developed countries, such as Germany, Canada and Norway, have proactively accepted refugees. The percentage of Syrian refugees who have settled in rich countries,⁵ however, remains less than three per cent as of the middle of 2016.⁶ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 10 per cent of Syrian refugees are under the most vulnerable conditions, and has asked the international community to resettle more refugees.⁷

Even though Japan ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter referred to as the 1951 Refugee Convention) in 1981 and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter referred to as the 1967 Protocol) in 1982,⁸ it has not fulfilled its duties as a signatory state. Japan has pledged a large amount of financial assistance to international organizations or countries which have accepted a large number of refugees, but has been reluctant to settle refugees in Japan. In 2016, when the worldwide refugee crisis was ongoing, Japan accepted only 28 refugees out of 10,901 applicants.⁹ Regarding Syrian refugees, only seven people were granted refugee status between 2011 and 2016.¹⁰ In May 2016, the Japanese government announced a plan to accept Syrian students

and their family members, but the number admitted is expected to be only around 300, including the family members.¹¹ They will be allowed to stay in Japan on student visas not long-term resident visas, which are usually given to refugees. Oxfam calculates a “fair share” of refugees for each country on the basis of the size of the economy, according to which Japan would be expected to accept around 50,000 refugees in total.¹² Why does the Japanese government maintain such a tough attitude toward the admission of refugees while offering large financial assistance to international organizations? Why did the government decide to accept Syrians as students and not as refugees? This article s the rationales behind the Japanese response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

Regarding Japanese refugee policy, many studies have tried to explain why the refugee recognition rate in Japan is lower than other countries.¹³ When it comes to the Japanese response toward specific refugee issues, many studies have focused on the admission of refugees from Indochina since 1978 and on the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1981 and its 1967 Protocol in 1982.¹⁴ However, there is as yet no study of Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis.

In order to explore the rationales behind Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis, I analyse the following sources: editorials, op-eds, feature articles and readers’ letters from two Japanese newspapers, *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Asahi Shimbun* (between March 2011 and June 2017), Diet proceedings, committee proceedings, and opinion polls. In addition, other publications provide context. As Turner states, media texts offer “opportunities to observe the cultural construction of meaning, locations where we can see the social production of ideas and values happening before our eyes”.¹⁵ Thus, media articulates the values of a society. In addition, as Flowers states, “Diet records are an excellent place to

locate discourses of state identity and legitimacy, mainly because they are not produced for an audience”.¹⁶ We can find frank opinions of policymakers from Diet proceedings and committee proceedings. By analysing these materials, I trace the formation of Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis. In addition, I consider whether Islamophobia has affected Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis. Finally, I consider future prospects for Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis.



Syrian refugees crossing from Syria into Northern Iraq (This image “17-03-10 02 Refugees” by Felton Davis is licenced under CC BY 2.0)

Refugee Policy in Japan

Although Japan had occasionally granted asylum status to people in need of protection such as the so-called “White Russians”, who resisted the Bolsheviks and fled the country after the Russian revolution in 1917, and Jews who fled from the Nazis in Europe,¹⁷ there was no systematic refugee recognition system in Japan until relatively recently. This was still the case after Japan regained independence with the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952 and became a member of the UN in 1956. It was with the arrival of Vietnamese asylum seekers that the admission of refugees began to be

discussed. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the political and socioeconomic turmoil in the region forced a large number of people to flee to seek asylum. From the middle of 1975, people who fled by sea started to arrive in Japan.¹⁸ In April 1978, the Japanese government decided to allow the resettlement of refugees and, between 1978 and 2005, 11,319 Indochinese refugees were settled in Japan based on a quota for Indochinese refugees.¹⁹ In 1981, three years after the decision to accept Indochinese refugees, Japan finally adopted the 1951 Refugee Convention and adopted its 1967 Protocol as well in 1982. In order to adopt these treaties, the Japanese government revised the Immigration Control Act (*Shutsu Nyūkoku Kanri hō*) to introduce the refugee recognition system and renamed it the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (*Shutsu Nyūkoku Kanri Oyobi Nanmin Nintei hō*).²⁰

Even after the ratification of the 1951 refugee convention and its protocol, however, the number of refugees accepted based on the Japanese refugee recognition system is very limited. Between 1982 and 2016, Japan accepted only 688 refugees out of 41,046 applications.²¹ Even if an application for refugee status is refused, though, applicants may be given residential status based on humanitarian considerations (*Jindō teki hairyo ni yoru Zairyū Tokubetsu Kyōka*). Between 1982 and 2016, 2,543 people whose refugee applications were rejected were allowed to stay in Japan based on humanitarian considerations.²² Thus, in reality, the number of people who are allowed to stay in Japan is larger than the numbers awarded official refugee status in any year. It should be noted, however, that some people who stay based on humanitarian considerations face various difficulties. For example, they have to renew their residential status every year because residential permission based on humanitarian considerations expires in one year. Also, they are basically not allowed to bring their family

to Japan, do not have a right to access services for refugees such as employment support and Japanese language education, and cannot obtain a refugee travel document.²³

When it comes to the acquisition of Japanese nationality, even people recognized as refugees have to meet the same requirements as other foreigners. Under the Japanese Nationality Law (*Kokuseki hō*), nationality is based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, meaning that one must have a Japanese parent to acquire Japanese nationality at birth. Children born in Japan of refugees (or other immigrants who have not naturalised) will not acquire Japanese nationality on birth.²⁴ Article five of the Nationality Law stipulates six requirements for the acquisition of Japanese nationality: residence in Japan for five consecutive years; twenty years of age or more and full capacity to act according to the law of his or her home country; being of upright conduct; being able to secure a livelihood by one's own property or those of one's spouse or other relatives with whom one lives on common living expenses; having no nationality, or the acquisition of Japanese nationality will result in the loss of foreign nationality; having never plotted or advocated the overthrow of the Constitution of Japan or the Government, or formed or belonged to an organization which has plotted or advocated it.²⁵ If an applicant has a certain kind of relationship with Japan, however, such as being born in Japan, being a child of a Japanese national and a spouse of a Japanese national, these requirements may be eased.²⁶

Apart from the ordinary refugee recognition system, in 2008, the Japanese government decided to launch a pilot resettlement program for Burmese refugees who were in a refugee camp in Thailand. In the initial plan, the resettlement program was supposed to run for three years from 2010, but in 2012 the program was extended for another two years. In 2014, the Japanese government decided to continue to accept Burmese refugees after

2015 as well. Since 2015, the target of the program changed to Burmese refugees from a refugee camp in Malaysia. The acceptance of refugees is carried out once a year and up to 30 people can be accepted at any one time. As of the end of 2016, 123 Burmese from 31 families had been resettled in Japan.²⁷

State Identity and National Identity

While Japanese refugee policy has been analysed from various perspectives, in this article I focus on the question of identity. As I will demonstrate below through discourse analysis, the rationales behind Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis can be explained by two types of identity: state identity and national identity. According to Flowers, Japan's state identity is defined as "identity as a member of the international community, with obligations to act accordingly"²⁸ and its national identity is defined as an identity "which conceptualizes the Japanese nation as a biological race".²⁹ Flowers states that, in the phase of the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention, state identity was the most important factor. Japan understands itself as an economic power and democratic country and believes that it has international duties based on these identities. On the other hand, in the compliance phase, national identity, which conceptualized Japan as a homogeneous country, constrained its compliance.³⁰ These two conflicting identities are useful in the analysis below as well. Flowers was writing about the adoption of the Refugee Convention, but both international and Japanese domestic environments have changed a lot since the beginning of the 1980s when Japan adopted the 1951 Refugee Convention and its protocol.

What should be noted about Flowers' definition of state identity is that "[o]bligations are part of state identity to the extent that they are shaped

by the perception of others, and they grow, at least in part, out of meanings that are attached to identity".³¹ According to Flowers, the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention by Japan in 1981 can be explained by the "desire for legitimacy" based on state identity.³² While I refer to Flowers' definition of state identity, I consider that its current primary component is different from when Japan adopted the 1951 refugee convention in 1981. Flowers points out several aspects of state identity such as "economic power", "democratic government" and "developed country".³³ As we shall see below, however, in the analysis of the Japanese response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the notion of "developed country" (*Senshin-koku*) shows up as the strongest component of state identity. In 1981, when Japan adopted the 1951 convention, it was the world's second-largest economy, but was overtaken by China in 2010.³⁴ In addition, a number of countries in East and Southeast Asia democratized in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁵ Due to these changes in the region, it may be that components like "economic power" and "democratic government" have gradually lost significance. Although other Asian countries have experienced social and economic development, Japan is still the only member of the Group of Seven (G7) in Asia,³⁶ which underscores its self-image as a developed country. Thus, in this article, I define Japan's state identity as an "identity as a developed country of the international community, with obligations to act accordingly".

On the other hand, under Flowers' definition of national identity, the nation is conceived as homogeneous. This myth of Japanese as a racially distinct and homogeneous people has historical roots, but there is no ethnic group of the Japanese race in the objective sense. Japanese people have been formed through a long period of mixture.³⁷ As Lie states, "[t]he fundamental forces of modern Japan— state-making, colonialism, and capitalist industrialization— engendered ethnic

heterogeneity".³⁸ Japan accepted people from different ethnicities in the process of its state-making. Oguma points out that the government of Imperial Japan (1890–1945) claimed that there were many different races in Japan, which was used to justify its imperial expansion and the incorporation of colonised people in its colonies.³⁹ After the defeat in the Second World War, however, Japanese intellectuals needed to adopt a different framework to rebuild the state. As non-Japanese people living in Japan became small minority groups following the loss of the colonies of Taiwan and Korea, the concept of a multi-national state was no longer embraced. Under these circumstances, a number of theories emerged which held that Japan was a homogeneous island nation that contained no "aliens".⁴⁰ Furthermore, a genre of works called *Nihonjinron*, which emphasizes the cultural uniqueness of the Japanese people, was popularized, shaping perceptions of the Japanese population.⁴¹ As a result, the assumption that Japan is a homogeneous society has come to be widely shared among Japanese,⁴² although there are also robust critiques of this position.⁴³ In this article, I define the national identity that has been mobilised in the immigration debate as an "identity as a homogeneous island nation which contains no aliens".

Discourses in Japan on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Since former Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko announced the first tranche of assistance of three million dollars to provide food and medical supplies through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UNHCR in February 2012,⁴⁴ the Japanese government has announced pledged 810 million dollars announced at the general assembly of the UN in September 2015⁴⁵ and an assistance package of 2.8 billion dollars for three years announced at the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants in September 2016.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the Japanese

government has been reluctant to accept refugees even after the Syrian refugee crisis. The number of Syrians who were granted refugee status by Japan between 2011 and 2016, however, is only seven out of 69 applicants.⁴⁷ The Japanese government maintained its tough attitude to the admission of Syrian refugees even after the UN urged Japanese to accept more refugees.⁴⁸ However, on 20 May 2016, just before the G7 *Ise-Shima* Summit, the government announced it would accept 150 Syrian students for five years from 2017.⁴⁹ The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) estimates that the total number of arrivals would reach around 300 including the students and their families.⁵⁰ In short, while the Japanese government pledged large financial assistance, it has been reluctant to accept refugees. Although it accepted some Syrians, they were accepted as students and not as refugees. Below, I examine discourses about the admission of Syrian refugees and explore the rationales behind the Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis.

Public opinion on the admission of refugees

Since the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011, the Japanese media has conducted opinion polls on this issue. According to an *Asahi Shimbun* poll conducted in December 2015, 24 per cent favoured accepting more refugees and 58 per cent answered opposed further admission of refugees.⁵¹ In the same way, an opinion poll carried out by *Mainichi Shimbun* in February 2017 shows that 69 per cent answered that Japan should be cautious about the admission of refugees and 15 per cent answered that Japan should accept more refugees.⁵² In an Internet opinion poll by Yahoo, whose reliability is lower, 83.1 per cent answered that Japan should be cautious about the admission of refugees and 11.7 per cent that Japan should accept more refugees.⁵³ In short, even after the

Syrian refugee crisis was exacerbated, a majority of Japanese citizens polled in media surveys opposed the admission of refugees.

How was the refugee issue discussed in the Japanese media?

I examined articles between March 2011 and June 2017 in *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Asahi Shimbun*. These are the two newspapers with the highest circulation with 9 million and 6.6 million readers respectively.⁵⁴ In general, *Yomiuri Shimbun* is considered conservative and *Asahi Shimbun* liberal.⁵⁵ In addition, according to Tokuyama, under the Abe regime, Japanese newspapers are divided into two groups: pro-government and anti-government.⁵⁶ *Yomiuri Shimbun* belongs to the pro-government group and *Asahi Shimbun* to the anti-government group. The validity of Tokuyama's argument needs to be investigated further, but, as we shall see, discussions about the admission of Syrian refugees to Japan in the two newspapers show a significant difference. While the admission of refugees has been discussed extensively in editorials, op-eds, feature articles and readers' letters in the *Asahi*, it has seldom been discussed in the *Yomiuri*. While there are some articles about the difficulties of refugees or asylum seekers who are already living in Japan⁵⁷ and a series of feature articles about Indochinese refugees in the paper from 26 April to 2 May in 2016,⁵⁸ the *Yomiuri* has published no articles on the admission of Syrian refugees. Therefore, this section focuses on the *Asahi*.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil war in 2011, *Asahi Shimbun* has reported extensively on the Syrian refugees and published comments of or interviews with executive officers of international organizations. It was not until November 2014, however, that the first mention of admission of Syrian refugees to Japan appeared in the newspaper.⁵⁹ Since then,

by the end of June 2017, four articles on the op-ed page, six editorials and 18 letters from readers mentioned the admission of Syrian refugees. In addition, a feature article about Japan and refugees was published on 23 November 2015.⁶⁰ While all of the op-ed articles and editorials criticized the current Japanese refugee policy and called for expansion of the admission of refugees, opinions opposing the admission of refugees were introduced in readers' letters and the feature article.

Looking at the opinions supporting the admission of more refugees, most include comments concerning one or more of these points:

- the reputation of Japan in international society;
- its responsibility as a developed country; and
- comparison with other developed countries.

For example, we can see a concern for the reputation of Japan from the following articles. An editorial on 23 November 2015 stated,

Japan has prohibited itself from exercising military actions abroad. As a result, Japan's reputation as a peace state (*Heiwa kokka burando*) is deep rooted in the Middle East. This reputation is important capital in Japanese diplomacy. [...]. We expect Japan to fulfil its role as a peace state which values humanitarian diplomacy.⁶¹

An editorial on 23 September 2016, which was published after the Japanese government announced the admission of Syrian people as students, also stated,

the fact that the number of

refugees accepted in Japan is extremely low and has not changed, so Japan has been criticised internationally. [...]. The government should broaden the range of engagement, open the doors to the world and aim to be a state which can fulfil its responsibilities (Asahi Shimbun 2016f).⁶²

In the same way, a letter on 17 September 2015 states that “the admission of refugees will raise the status and dignity of Japan in international society”,⁶³ and a letter on 5 October 2015 also stated that the admission of refugees would “improve the reliability of Japan as seen by other countries”.⁶⁴

Similarly, some articles show concern about Japan’s responsibility as a developed country. For example, an editorial on 7 April 2015 insisted that the Abe government should face the admission of refugees in order to pursue its contributions to international society, stating that “Japan needs to realize that the rescue of refugees is the least responsibility of a developed country”.⁶⁵ An editorial on 1 October 2015 pointed out the small number of refugees in Japan and stated,

even given the geographical distance between western countries and Japan, the number is too low. It cannot be said that Japan fulfils its international responsibility.⁶⁶

A letter on 25 March 2016 also states that “the admission of immigrants and refugees is a part of our responsibility to share humanitarian assistance as a member of international society”.⁶⁷ In a feature article on 23 November 2015, similar concerns can be seen from readers’ letters, such as “the admission of

refugees is the duty of a developed country” or the “inaction of the Japanese government shows the lack of a global perspective as a developed country”.⁶⁸

There are articles which show concern about the Japanese response in comparison with other countries. An op-ed by Ōno Hiroto, editor-in-chief of the *Asahi*, on 3 May 2015 stated that, “the number of refugees who have been accepted by Japan is too low compared with western countries”⁶⁹ and an editorial on 13 August said that “we need to focus on why the number of refugees recognized in Japan has been low compared to other countries”.⁷⁰ A letter on 6 September 2015 praises the attitude of German Chancellor Angela Merkel for criticising anti-refugee demonstrations and calling for cooperation with the European Union. Comparing Germany and Japan, the letter concludes that the “dedication of Japan as a peace state is at stake”⁷¹.



Syrian refugees arriving on the shores of Lesbos island in Greece (This image “Syrian Refugees” by Freedom House is in the public domain)

On the other hand, looking at the opinions against the admission of refugees, we can see comments concerning one or several of these

points:

- the difficulty of adaptation of refugees to Japanese society;
- the inability to afford accepting refugees; and
- concerns for security.

For example, a letter on 13 February 2015 states,

it is difficult for refugees to adapt to Japanese language, religion and culture. Due to the language barrier, it is expected that they cannot get a job they want [...]. If confrontation between refugees and Japanese citizens arises, that may cause a xenophobic movement".⁷²

In addition, a feature article on 23 November 2015 expresses concern for the adaptation of refugees based on their different appearance, stating that "in Japan, it seems difficult for people from the Middle East, who have a different appearance, to be accepted in Japanese society."⁷³

In the same article there are concerns that Japan cannot 'afford' to accept refugees.

There are Japanese people who do not have money and a place to live. There are also young people called *Nettocafe Nanmin* (internet café refugees), who are living in Internet cafés. If refugees come to Japan, where would they live?⁷⁴

The author continued, "there are victims of the Great East Japan earthquake who are still living in temporary houses. Can Japan afford to accept refugees?"⁷⁵

There are also concerns expressed concerning security. "There is a possibility that terrorists will enter Japan as refugees. How can we check the identity of refugees?"⁷⁶

As *Asahi Shimbun* is considered to be liberal, not surprisingly the majority opinions favour the admission of refugees. However, at the same time, opinions from readers opposed to the admission of refugees also appear. As illustrated by the absence of discussion in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the admission of Syrian refugees to Japan has not been discussed much elsewhere in the Japanese media. It can be said that the *Asahi* is the place where the admission of refugees to Japan has been discussed most actively.

To supplement the discussion in newspapers, I would like to examine other publications. While the number of articles discussion the admission of Syrian refugees to Japan is limited, consider two articles published in *sōgō zasshi*, a magazine which makes available literary works as well as critical analysis on politics, economy and society.

One of the articles was published in *Sekai* (World), whose tone is progressive liberal. The author is Yamaguchi Kaoru, Campaign Coordinator of Amnesty International Japan. She raises issues related to refugee acceptance procedure in the Basic Plan for Immigration Control (5th Edition) released in September 2015.⁷⁷ The Fifth Basic Plan for Immigration Control mentions the establishment of a system to protect people who flee their country because of so-called "new forms of persecution (*Atarashii keitai no hakugai*)", which is a type of persecution the Refugee Convention does not stipulate. The plan, however, also mentions restrictive measures such as sorting out applications based on reasons clearly inconsistent with the Refugee Convention and setting restrictions on the resubmission of an application.⁷⁸ Her argument mainly focuses on institutional issues of the Fifth Basic Plan, but

she states, “[t]he Fifth Basic Plan for Immigration Control will provide a foundation for how Japanese people build a relationship with foreigners looking toward the Tokyo Olympic Games. International society is watching not only Japanese tourism but also how Japan makes a humanitarian contribution”.⁷⁹

Although the main point of her argument is institutional issues, similar to the newspapers, we can see words concerning the status of Japan in international society.

Another article is from the magazine called *Bungei Shunjū*, whose tone is conservative. The author is Sono Ayako, a conservative writer. While not precluding the admission of refugees in the future, she states that it is too early for Japan to accept refugees. She reasons that “while European countries have knowledge about admission of refugees because of their historical experiences, as Japan is an island country in the Pacific Ocean, Japanese people are insensitive to the difficulty of accepting refugees.”⁸⁰

She also states that “Japanese people do not know how difficult it is for people who have different backgrounds, religions, cultures and physical appearance to live together.”⁸¹

In short, she insists that Japan does not know how to accept foreign people because of its historical or geographical background.⁸² While the number of publications concerning the admission of Syrian refugees to Japan is quite limited, we can see similar rationales to those found in newspapers.

Diet proceedings and committees

Although the issues related to the Syrian Civil War and the subsequent refugee crisis have been discussed since around 2012 in the Diet and its committees, the Prime Minister and the

Minister for Foreign Affairs only highlighted the financial assistance Japan had pledged and did not mention the admission of refugees. In addition, other members of the Diet did not ask the government about the admission of refugees. It was not until 27 November 2013 in the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives that the admission of refugees was discussed in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis for the first time.⁸³ Since then, the response to the Syrian refugee crisis has been discussed in the Diet or its committees. In many cases, while an ordinary member of parliament made remarks which pointed out the shortcomings of Japanese refugee policy or urged the admission of refugees, Cabinet Ministers supported the non-admission of refugees.

What was most obvious from discussions in the Diet and its committees was the desire to maintain a good reputation in international society. On many occasions, Diet members mentioned that “Japan was valued by other countries” to support the admission of refugees to Japan. For example, in the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives on 27 November 2013, Yamauchi Kōichi, a member of the opposition Your Party,⁸⁴ asked why refugee acceptance in Japan was becoming more difficult. He pointed out that the Japanese refugee recognition system was one of the strictest among developed countries. He further stated that if Japan could not establish a system in which refugees could be treated in a humanitarian manner, “Japan would be humiliated in international society”.⁸⁵ In addition, Sonoura Kentarō, a member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party⁸⁶ raised the issue of Syrian students studying in Japan. He pointed out the hardships Syrian students studying in Japan faced. He stated that they were not allowed to bring their families because their families were already outside Syria and the Japanese government does not allow entry from a third country. In addition, their scholarships from the Syrian government

had been stopped, but they could not get any support in Japan and were not allowed to work in Japan either. He pointed out that “this issue could affect the credibility of Japan among other countries”.⁸⁷ Okamoto Mitsunari, a member of the New Komeito Party⁸⁸ also commented on the international reputation of Japan. He stated,

though the Prime Minister announced financial assistance of \$850 million, no international media treated this as important news [...]. On the other hand, what we were told by host countries of refugees was that, if Japan would accept 100 refugees as students each year and educate them to become leaders of their home countries, media all over the world would highly value Japanese humanitarian assistance and report the Japanese commitment widely.⁸⁹

On the other hand, ministers highlighted the claim that “Japan’s strength is in offering financial assistance”, which implies that the admission of refugees is not Japan’s role. In the Budget Committee on 2 February 2015, Prime Minister Abe stated that “the role that Japan is expected to play is to contain the spread of extremism in cooperation with international society and to offer humanitarian assistance unique to Japan to neighbouring countries.”⁹⁰

In addition, The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kishida Fumio, when asked about what Japan could do for Syrian refugees other than financial assistance, stated that, while European countries experienced difficulties in the acceptance of refugees, “the Japanese strong point and Japanese duty is to contribute to the stabilization of the region which caused the flow of refugees.”⁹¹

Furthermore, Prime Minister Abe, in a discussion about Donald Trump’s controversial travel ban prohibiting citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US for 90 days and all refugees for 120 days,⁹² stated more directly that the way to utilize Japanese strength was not to accept refugees but to solve root issues and offer financial assistance.

It is important for each country to address this issue by making the best use of their country’s characteristics. Japan has been doing as many things as possible, but, unfortunately, it is impossible for Japan to accept 10,000 or 20,000 refugees. Rather than that, it is important to address the root issues which cause the flow of refugees, offering substantial assistance to neighbouring countries [...] it is true that Japanese contributions in those fields are already appreciated in international society.⁹³



Syrian refugees and relief supplies from Japan in Basirma Camp, Iraq (This image “IOM and Japan continue to help Syrian

**refugees” by UN Migration Agency (IOM)
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Abe’s reluctance to accept refugees can be seen in his remarks at the UN general assembly in 2015. Asked about the admission of refugees by a reporter, he answered, “I would say that before accepting immigrants or refugees, we need to have more activities by women, elderly people and we must raise our birth rate. There are many things that we should do before accepting immigrants.”⁹⁴

Even though he was asked about the admission of refugees, he answered about demographic issues in Japan. He continued,

Japan would like to contribute by changing the conditions that give rise to refugees. The cause of this tragedy is the fear of violence and terrorism, and terror of poverty. The world must cooperate in order for them to find a way to escape poverty.⁹⁵

His remarks show his intention to avoid discussion about the admission of refugees in Japan and to highlight Japanese financial assistance.

In their remarks, Ministers also highlight the fact that Syrian people have been allowed to stay in Japan based on humanitarian considerations although they are not granted refugee status. In the Committee on Audit on 6 February 2015, Prime Minister Abe stated,

[e]ven if applicants are not recognised as a refugee as stipulated in the refugee convention, they are allowed to

stay in Japan when there is a need to protect them based on humanitarian considerations. In 2014, 156 people were allowed to stay based on humanitarian considerations and 26 of them are Syrians. In 2015, as of the end of November, 98 people including 12 Syrians were allowed to stay in Japan.⁹⁶

In the same way, the Minister of Justice Iwaki Mitsuhide, when asked about the admission of Syrian refugees in the Budget Committee on 25 February 2016, stated that,

Syrian applicants for refugee status are allowed to stay in Japan even if they are not recognized as a refugee. We are accepting them as emergency cases based on humanitarian considerations.⁹⁷

In short, as we can see from these remarks, the Abe government considers that they are protecting Syrian people even if they are not granting them refugee status.

In the discussion in the Diet and its committees we can see the desire to protect Japan’s reputation as a nation, or the desire to be highly valued by other countries, as a rationale for promoting the admission of refugees. This rationale can be found in the remarks of ordinary members of parliament. On the other hand, government ministers highlighted the view that the way to utilize Japanese strength is not to accept refugees but to offer financial assistance. Although differing in opinions, both sides argued on the grounds of Japan’s international reputation.

Islamophobia in Japan

Before analysing the discourses above, I would like to mention Islamophobia in Japan. In European countries, the rise of Islamophobia has been noted amid the influx of refugees from Muslim countries. According to a survey conducted in 2016, Islamophobia is on the rise in fields including education, employment, media, politics, the justice system and the Internet in European countries. Public opposition to further migration from predominantly Muslim countries is very high.⁹⁸ When it comes to the admission of Syrian refugees in Japan, as we can see from Japanese media and the proceedings of the Diet and its committees, Islamophobic discourses are rarely expressed explicitly. In the middle of 2015, however, when European countries were experiencing the influx of refugees, one illustration of a Syrian refugee girl drawn by a Japanese artist caused controversy.

An illustration drawn by Japanese Manga artist Hasumi Toshiko was posted on her official Facebook account on 10 September 2015. The illustration was probably traced from a photo of a Syrian girl at a refugee settlement in Lebanon taken by a Canadian photographer. Hasumi added text which shows the girl's thought bubble in the background, saying, "I want to live a safe and clean life, have a gourmet meal, go out freely, wear pretty things and luxuriate. I want to live my life the way I want without a care in the world — all at the expense of someone else". It concludes, "I have an idea. Why don't I become a refugee?"⁹⁹ Many people were outraged by this illustration and an online petition calling on Facebook Japan to recognize it as a racist work was launched. Although Facebook Japan did not remove the illustration, saying that it did not violate community standards, Hasumi deleted the illustration herself, saying that it had caused too much trouble for the photographer who took the original photo.¹⁰⁰ Only a few months later, however, her new book *"Sōda Nanmin Shiyō – Hasumi Toshiko no sekai"* (Why don't I become a refugee? – The world of Hasumi

Toshiko)¹⁰¹ was published. The book features her illustrations which anti-racism campaigners called racist cartoons. It also includes the illustration of the Syrian girl though her appearance has been changed so that she does not look like the girl in the original photo taken by the Canadian photographer.¹⁰² While the book outraged many people, others praised it. For example, it has received 401 reviews on an online book store, Amazon.co.jp, as of November 2017 and it is rated on average 4.6 out of 5 stars.¹⁰³

Does this mean the rise of Islamophobia in Japan by either the government or the general public? It is true that Muslim community in Japan has been kept under surveillance. In 2010, confidential documents of the Metropolitan Police Department were leaked online, which revealed that the police had compiled personal information about Muslims.¹⁰⁴ After the leak, 17 of the Muslims named in the leaked documents sued the national and Tokyo governments for violating their constitutional rights. The Supreme Court issued a ruling on 31 May 2016 after two appeals. While the decision ordered the Tokyo government to pay a total of 90 million yen in compensation to the plaintiffs, it upheld the ruling by lower courts that the surveillance was necessary.

I consider, however, that this surveillance does not necessarily mean that Islamophobia is spreading in Japanese society. For example, Satō Ken'ei, a journalist who has been researching the Muslim community in Japan, believes that Islamophobia is less prevalent in Japan than in many European countries.¹⁰⁵ In the beginning of 2015, following the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, an incident occurred in which two Japanese citizens were killed in Syria by ISIS. There was a concern that these two events might affect Japanese attitude to Muslims. According to Satō, however, most Muslims in Japan have not felt changes in Japanese people's attitudes. In some Mosques

in Japan, the number of non-Muslim Japanese who want to visit the Mosques to learn about Islam has even increased after those incidents.¹⁰⁶

One possible explanation for why Islamophobia is not so explicit in Japan is that the number of Muslims is relatively small compared with European countries. There is no official data about the number of Muslims, but Tanada, estimates that they number around 140,000 to 150,000.¹⁰⁷ Regarding their nationality, Indonesia is the largest source at 28,000 followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh.¹⁰⁸ While the number of mosques is on the increase and there are more than 90 mosques in Japan,¹⁰⁹ the presence of Muslim in Japanese society is very low compared with Europe.

Since Islamophobia in Japan has hardly been discussed, it is hard to discern its effect on Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis. However, some studies point to a rise of xenophobic movements since the mid 2000s in Japan.¹¹⁰ Those movements mainly targeted people of Korean or Chinese ancestry rather than refugees.¹¹¹ For example, the controversial book by Hasumi Toshiko, "*Sōda Nanmin Shiyo*", mentioned above also includes illustrations of attacks on Koreans.¹¹² As the case of the illustration of a Syrian girl shows, however, amid the global refugee crisis, there is a possibility that refugees will be attacked by others using the same discourse as existing xenophobic movements. In the same way, if the outflow of Muslim refugees continues, these xenophobic movements may develop connotations of Islamophobia.



Tokyo Camii (also known as Tokyo Mosque) in the Ōyama-chō district of Shibuya ward in Tokyo, Japan (This image "Tokyo Camii" by Guilhem Vellut is licenced under CC BY 2.0)

How have Japanese responses been shaped?

The Japanese government actually has accepted more refugees than public opinion would dictate. In this section, I would like to consider how the rationales behind the Japanese government's response have been shaped. One possible explanation is that opinion polls show negative attitudes regarding the admission of refugees. As shown above, the majority of respondents to opinion polls opposed the admission of refugees. However, low public support cannot fully explain why the Japanese government takes a certain policy. A public opinion poll conducted by the Prime Minister's Office in 1980 showed that only 3 per cent said that Japan should accept Indochinese refugees as settlers,¹¹³ but the Japanese government started the admission of Indochinese refugees in 1978 and, between 1978 and 2005, 11,319 Indochinese refugees settled in Japan. The Japanese government also adopted the 1951 Refugee convention in 1981. In addition, low public support cannot explain why the Japanese government decided to

accept Syrian students but not refugees. We need to focus on other factors to explain the Japanese responses.

As noted above, based on the analysis of Japanese discourse, rationales that promote the admission of refugees can be classified as follows.

- The desire for a good reputation in international society
- The desire to fulfil Japan's responsibility as a developed country
- The desire not to fall behind other developed countries

I consider that the rationales that promote the admission of refugees can best be explained by state identity. As explained above, Japan's state identity is defined as an "identity as a developed country of the international community, with obligations to act accordingly". As we saw in media texts and proceedings of the Diet and its committees, there is a shared idea that Japan is a developed country, so Japan needs to act accordingly. This idea has led to the desire to be valued highly by other countries and not to fall behind other developed countries. Especially in proceedings of the Diet and its committees, politicians often mention "international society" (*kokusai shakai*). These remarks in the discussion on the admission of Syrian refugees show how much Japanese politicians care about how Japan is valued by other countries.

Regarding the rationales preventing the admission of refugees, we note these rationales from newspaper and Diet proceedings.

- It is difficult for refugees to adapt to Japanese society due to language barriers or cultural differences
- Japan does not know how to accept foreign people because of its historical or geographical background
- The way to utilize Japanese strength is by offering financial assistance (rather than

accepting refugees)

- Japan cannot afford to accept refugees (because there are many Japanese suffering hardships)
- The admission of refugees undermines security

I consider that all of these rationales except for the concern for security are connected with Japan's national identity. For this purpose, Japan's national identity is defined as an "identity as a homogeneous island nation which contains no aliens". As mentioned above, this identity is not based on reality. As Yoshino states, there is no ethnic group of the Japanese 'race' in the objective sense and Japanese people have been formed through a long period of mixture.¹¹⁴ Moreover, in contemporary Japanese society, the ethnicity of Japanese citizens is being further diversified. According to a survey by the Health, Labour and Welfare Ministry and Kyodo news, one in 29 babies born in Japan in 2014 had at least one non-Japanese parent.¹¹⁵ However, we can see the influence of discourses of Japan's national identity in rationales which prevent the admission of refugees.

For example, the rationale that Japan does not know how to accept foreign people because of its historical or geographical background is based on the idea that Japan is a homogeneous nation which has not accepted foreigners. In addition, Japanese people believe that Japan has not accepted a large number of people from other countries, and they also think that the Japanese strength lies in offering financial assistance. The idea that Japan cannot afford to accept refugees is also related to national identity since the financial argument is debateable. Japan pledged a huge amount of financial assistance to countries that accepted refugees. If Japan accepted more refugees instead of offering a large amount of financial assistance, the argument for accepting refugees goes, more money could be spent on domestic issues such as support for poor

people. In addition, in the long term, refugees resettled in Japan may pay more in tax than the financial support they receive. The national identity of “a homogeneous island nation which contains no aliens”, however, could make people overestimate the financial burden caused by the admission of refugees.

Regarding the difficulty of adaptation for foreigners, it may have a certain legitimacy. Japan accepted more than 10,000 Indochinese refugees in the early 1980s, but some of them faced difficulties adapting to Japanese society especially in terms of finding employment.¹¹⁶ However, according to the survey by Shingaki and Asano, many Vietnamese refugees perceive their bicultural characteristics positively.¹¹⁷ Some of them have taken positions in Japanese companies expanding into Vietnam. They consider that they can make use of their Vietnamese proficiency and living experiences in Japan to boost their career.¹¹⁸ I assume that the focus on Japan’s national identity heightens people’s concern over linguistic and cultural differences.

Given the points mentioned above, I consider that the Japanese response to the Syrian refugee crisis can be explained in terms of the interaction between Japan’s state identity, which promotes the admission of refugees, and Japan’s national identity, which hinders the admission of refugees. To be more precise, it is the result of the Japanese government pursuing desires congruent with its state identity without damaging its national identity.

To maintain Japan’s state identity as “a developed country of the international community, with obligations to act accordingly”, the Japanese government has allocated large amounts of financial assistance. The fact that the plan for this financial assistance was announced at an important international venue like the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants shows the Japanese

government’s desire for legitimacy as a developed country.

The Japanese government’s decision to accept Syrian people as students can be explained by the interaction of state identity and national identity. The Japanese government wants to fulfil its obligations as a developed country to maintain its state identity, but it tried to do this without damaging its exclusionary national identity. Thus, the government chose to accept Syrian people as students and not refugees. They are allowed to enter Japan on student visas, so the Japanese government accepts them as temporary residents. Some Syrian students may stay in Japan after finishing their studies but, at least, the impact of this policy on Japan’s national identity would be limited because they are defined as “students” not “refugees”.

The same explanation can be applied to residential permissions for Syrian people based on humanitarian considerations. The Japanese government considers that it has a responsibility as a developed country to protect Syrians who submit refugee applications in Japan, but, at the same time, it does not want to ease conditions for refugee acceptance, for fear that it would cause a further flow of refugees. As a result, they allow Syrian people to stay in Japan based on humanitarian considerations but without awarding refugee status. The number of Syrian people who have been granted refugee status is only seven but, except for people who left Japan after submitting a refugee application, all other Syrian asylum seekers remain in Japan.¹¹⁹ Because of this, the Japanese government can claim that it is protecting Syrian refugees without easing the conditions for refugee recognition.

The strategy of fulfilling these purposes without damaging national identity can be seen in Japanese immigration policy as well. In 1990, the Japanese government enforced the

amended Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and created a new category of visa, “long-term resident (*teijūsha*)”. This new visa category allowed people who have a Japanese grandparent to stay and work in Japan.¹²⁰ The creation of the new visa brought an influx of descendants of Japanese emigrants called *Nikkeijin* from South American countries. Regarding this policy, Miyajima points out that the admission of *Nikkeijin* was viewed by Japanese policy makers as an effective way to deal with the labour shortage without damaging Japanese ethnic homogeneity.¹²¹ As this policy also shows, it is quite important for the Japanese government to maintain its conception of national identity.¹²²

Future prospects

Before concluding this article, I would like to discuss future prospects of Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis. Given the Japanese government’s resistance to administering policies affecting its national identity, it is unlikely that the Japanese government will accept a large number of refugees in the near future. There is, however, a new movement for Syrian refugees initiated by civil society. In February 2017, the Japan Association for Refugees (JAR) announced that it would start a refugee admissions program in cooperation with Japanese language schools.¹²³ As the first step, they accepted six Syrian refugees as students in two Japanese language schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area and the Kansai region.¹²⁴ JAR, as the second round of their admission program, plans to accept another six Syrian students in language schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area and Okinawa prefecture.¹²⁵ In addition, in June 2017, International Christian University (ICU) and the Japan ICU Foundation (JICUF) announced they would launch the Syrian Scholarship Initiative, which is a full scholarship to support Syrian students throughout their entire

undergraduate education at ICU including tuition fees, living expenses and travel costs. This is an eight-year program from 2017 to 2025 and they are planning to accept six students in total for four years each.¹²⁶ By contrast, in Canada, more than 275,000 refugees have been settled since 1979 by privately-sponsored refugee admission programs.¹²⁷ Privately-sponsored refugee admission programs are still in the initial stages in Japan, but there is a possibility that they will expand. In addition, there is a support program for refugees initiated by a Japanese private company. Fast Retailing, which owns the casual fashion brand UNIQLO, entered into a global partnership with UNHCR in 2011. As part of the partnership, Fast Retailing launched an employment program at UNIQLO stores in Japan for those granted refugee status and residency by the Japanese government and their families.¹²⁸ Such programs may help Syrian people who are accepted to earn their livelihood in Japan in the future. Actors in civil society, however, do not have the authority to change the institutional framework of refugee protection itself. They have to act under the existing framework, so drastic changes in the number of refugees cannot be anticipated.

Conclusion

To summarise, Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis can be explained by the two conflicting identities: state identity and national identity. While the Japanese government desires to maintain its state identity as a developed nation, it does not want to impair its national identity as a homogeneous island nation. As a result of the interaction of these two goals, the Japanese government has announced a large amount of financial assistance to support Syrian refugees outside of Japan but has been reluctant to accept refugees. In the same way, some people are allowed to stay in Japan, but almost all

residential permissions are based on student visas or humanitarian considerations, which means they are “temporary” residents, so that their admission does not contradict Japan’s national identity. There is a new movement initiated by civil society to admit more refugees, but actors in civil society can act only under the framework formed by the Japanese government. Thus, at least under existing conditions, it would be difficult to expect drastic changes in Japanese responses to the Syrian refugee crisis or future refugee crises.

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Atsushi Yamagata recently completed a Master of International Studies at the University of Wollongong. He previously completed a Master of Human Sciences at Waseda University.

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